

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH
COLONEL MARK SPINDLER,
COMMANDER, 18TH MILITARY POLICE BRIGADE,
VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM CAMP VICTORY, IRAQ

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COL. SPINDLER: Hi, Jack. This is Colonel Mark Spindler.

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Oh, Colonel
Spindler, thank you for joining us today. Welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable.
We appreciate you joining us.

COL. SPINDLER: My pleasure.

MR. HOLT: Having a little -- have a little technical difficulty on our
end. But well, sir, if you're ready, we'll -- let's get started. If you've got
an opening statement for us, the floor is --

COL. SPINDLER: Well, I do, and first of all, I appreciate the opportunity
be with you this afternoon or this morning, your time, I guess. We've got
pretty a bad windstorm going on here, so I don't know how -- what havoc that's
going to play on everything. But anyway, good morning. Thanks again.

A little background on the 18th Military Police Brigade. The 18th Brigade
is stationed out of Mannheim, Germany. This is the brigade headquarters' third
tour into Iraq in the last five years.

The 18th Military Police Task Force in Iraq is composed of active and
Reserve component units assigned from U.S. forces from around the world,

continental United States and overseas bases. We have soldiers, airmen, sailors assigned to the brigade, and I got to tell you, these service members from all the services are just doing a truly remarkable job. And if you think about that, they're from different services, they're joining a Military Police brigade, and they're adjusting fire, and they're just doing an extraordinary job supporting us in our main mission, and that being the development of the Iraqi police in Iraq.

And so I -- there's a few things I'd like to touch upon, and if you'd give me a couple minutes -- and then I'd be glad to answer your questions -- the topics will be the Iraqi police forces in Baghdad and a little bit around all of Iraq, their development and their operations systems, in order to get them a trained and professional Iraqi service that's properly integrated into the Iraqi security scheme.

And I think that's an important point, is that we're developing a police force not in a vacuum but as part of the Iraqi security forces, with the army and national police, because frankly, we're at a point in the operation where it is imperative that all three of these are dependent on each other to provide the full spectrum of security as we deal with al Qaeda and insurgents, at one end, and all the way down to criminal activity at the other end of the spectrum.

Our service members here in the 18th Military Police Brigade are made up of police transition teams. Now these police transition teams advise and have trained the police at all levels: at the station, district, directorate and provincial level.

Policemen here -- they're also known as shurta. That's their term for police.

We have -- our police go in, and we go in the station level, and we train and advise them on police operations, because in many cases they have just walked out, they've had the very basic police skills given to them at an academy.

And then they come into a station and now they've got to not only come together as a group, but they've got to get a feel for the community, what the community needs are, and then they got to establish themselves as a police force that is embraced by the community. So you can imagine there is a -- there's a whole lot of dynamics that take place there.

Oh -- and oh, by the way, you got to do that on top of a war-torn nation that's infrastructure that's been shattered. So there's certainly a lot to do, a lot has been accomplished, and I'll talk a little bit about that, I'm sure, in the question and answer period. But we are also seeing -- and this has been going on for probably about the last, oh, I guess, since really in earnest after OIF 1, and since OIF 2 and to the present time, we've been concentrating now on the development of the police force.

And we have found that we're getting to a point now in our development that we need to transition to something a little bit more sophisticated in the overall police development, and what I mean by that is that our concentration now is not going to be so much on the police station level, which it certainly will continue to be, but we're going to continue, we're going to try to focus on the police systems, their infrastructure, their information management, their organizational effectiveness from the shurta on the ground all the way up to the commissioner of police level at provincial level.

And how these systems are going to be developed is really the task at hand because where we're at right now is it's not enough to have a police force, we've got to be able to sustain that police force. And so that's kind of in concert with what the Army's been doing and the national police. We're in a phase in the campaign now where we're shifting our focus up a little bit so that they can reach self-sustainment, and we believe that these systems is what is key for the continuity and the full sustainability of the police.

And the last thing that we're currently under -- that we're doing right now is the Iraqi police expansion throughout Baghdad, and I'm sure you're aware and you've seen news and been part of it, I'm sure, that the security has improved in Baghdad. So we're taking -- we're taking advantage of that, and while the violence is down and there is a sense of openness or permissiveness now in the streets, we're putting more police into the streets to take a greater foothold for the people.

And that's -- it's quite an ambitious task upward near beyond 12,000 is initially what we're looking at doing, but of course when you do all that, you've got infrastructure challenges, you've got to bring more police officers, the officers that run the shurta. We've got infrastructure deals, and of course the one thing which plagues us and continues to plague us -- and "plague's" probably a difficult word. Our biggest challenge is the logistics piece. Continuously having to give them logistics they need to do their job.

So that's kind of the phase where we're at right now. Two things. One, we're shifting our focus now up to the systems level, and on top of that, we're doing a recruiting thing to put more police out on the streets. So you can see kind of there that if you're systems aren't there, how are you going to cover that? Well, we're doing it in stride, and the success to this has been the great sergeants and captains on the ground that have been making this happen at the community level.

So that's our muscle movements for the 18th Brigade; that's what we'll be looking at doing over the next year. And so, you know, I'd be glad to answer any questions you might have about that.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much, sir.

And Andrew?

Q Great. Colonel, Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. I appreciate you taking the afternoon to speak with us. Okay.

COL. SPINDLER: Yes, sir.

Q I guess, Jack, what, this is going to be a private conversation today? This is going to be the best one?

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.) Yeah.

Q (Laughs.) Colonel, I spent some in Iraq, like about seven months in a couple different embeds. The major problem I saw -- what teaching these young men -- the Iraqis -- you know, they come out of the police academies and you teach them how to shoot, you know, how to drive and everything else, that's doable. But morals and ethics, these guys got problems. What are you doing -- and from the police commissioner stealing big dollars to the local kids stealing

bits and pieces of money, how are you addressing this problem? Or is it something that can be addressed?

COL. SPINDLER: Well, we are addressing the problem. And then, one of the things we found out -- and this is through the learning process for us, is, what they were doing is that -- we were training the police and putting them in the station and having them go forward. The missing piece to that was the governance piece. What does the local government require and want of them? We didn't -- they didn't have -- they had an expectation of coalition forces of what right looked like, but what the missing piece was what did the local leaders see as right is.

And so what you're seeing at the local level is community leaders meeting with police leaders to talk about their problems, and that way, the local police understand what the needs are and can address those needs instead of what the coalition thinks the needs are.

And secondly, our recruiting and our assignment of police officers now are -- we're focusing on making sure that that comes out of the community itself. Before, what we were doing was we were training people out at the academies and then we would try and push them out into the areas in which they were needed most. Well, we found that that got a bit problematic, because as you know, in this culture it's very important, as the sheikhs and local leaders play a huge part in the governance of security piece, that they know these people and that they can vouch for these people. So, we've done a better job, I think, in recruiting and assigning and locally, and two, involving local government in the expectations of the police in their area.

Q Are you pretty much adapting the Anbar model, where you're taking the guys, put them back on their street and their block then?

COL. SPINDLER: Absolutely. Absolutely. And of course, with Baghdad, there's so many different mahalas and different dynamics that take place, it's a little bit more dynamic and a little more difficult, but that's exactly what we're doing.

Q Okay. But when you have -- I appreciate you need to go back and talk to the local -- the sheikhs and the tribal leaders as to what they need, but what keeps the kid in the street from shaking down the taxi driver for 10 bucks here and 5 bucks there? I mean, when I was over there, at one point there was a big problem. The IPs ran a roadblock, which they told the IAs -- and I was with the PTTs team, and they said it was for security. They were shaking down the drivers and stealing good cars. Boy, that's a culture problem that's going to be hard to overcome, or is it being overcome?

COL. SPINDLER: Yeah, it is hard to overcome, but I -- sir, I've got to tell you, I think we're seeing it overcome.

Q Okay.

COL. SPINDLER: And there's a couple of reasons for that. Now, when I say overcome, we've got a long way to go. There's still those problems. But what you're seeing with a more permissive environment, I think you're starting to see concerned local citizens -- which is a program that's going on here, and where we're involving more people into the security of the area outside the police force. I think you're starting to see more buy-in. And I think you're starting to see the police -- or the people and business people are starting to pressure

the police that they don't want this stuff. They want to have their markets out there. They want to sell their markets -- I mean, they want to sell their goods at the markets, and they want to do so peacefully.

And so I think -- and I don't want to overstate the case, but I think what you're starting to see is a little bit more buy-in. You're seeing a little bit more community effort into keeping these things from happening. Do they happen? You bet. And we get involved, "we" being coalition, when we see that. But a third thing that is even more important is that I think you're starting to see the Iraqi police leadership step up to the plate and do something about it.

Now, is it to the level of what we would like to see and to the aggressiveness we'd like to see? Not all the time, but at least they're stepping up to the plate and they're saying, "Hey, this is our problem, coalition; we'll call you if we need you."

Q Okay. I mean, that's the problem with what I've seen the past couple years, at least from my point of view, is sometimes like we're trying to put our system on them. They're in the Middle East. They're Arabs. They're Iraqis. Shaking down the taxi driver is part of -- they don't pay much and they supplement their incomes. So are we maybe being too harsh in trying to make them do it our way, do you think?

COL. SPINDLER: Oh, that's absolutely right. And, you know, the learning process has not only been a learning process for the Iraqis, it's been a learning process for us, because we come into this thing only with a Western culture that we try to provide. And so we're trying to show them what we believe "right" looks like, and so the education process for us has been over these last few years is to try and figure out their culture, what "right" looks like for them, you know, and they've got to kind of adapt a little bit.

So it's really been a give and take in this thing. And I will tell you, sometimes it's frustrating. We don't understand why or it makes no sense to us why they want to do the things they want to do, but nevertheless, culturally it's what they want to do. And I will tell you, sir, what we have found in our small programs, be it at the station level all the way up to the very top, that no matter how involved we are, if there is not Iraqi buy-in into the program, it's going to fail. It's going to fail. Because ultimately they're going to do what they want to do.

Q They're a country. They know what to do and we don't. That's --

COL. SPINDLER: Yeah, that's absolutely right. Yes, sir. And the learning curve for us has really been that. And I think we're doing a better job at that, at learning. I think we're doing a little better at listening. And I think the environment allows us to do that. You know, a couple of years ago it was a pretty hot environment, so there wasn't the patience there to sit there, you know, and wait for them to do these things. We had an active enemy out there that was hurting the people, was hurting our coalition forces, and so we were kind of driving home the point. But we have progressed to a point now where we are pushing more and more to their control, and that requires a bit of a tactical patience on our part to say, "You know what, I would never do it like that," but that's what they want to do and we got to help them do that.

MR. HOLT: Are you finding that the community's buying in? You mentioned that air of permissiveness, a little more permissiveness out on the streets. The community is accepting the police officers and accepting the structure?

COL. SPINDLER: Yeah, I think so. And you know, let me give you another learning thing we found out. You know, before, when we were doing our assessments of how do we know this is working, we were going in with our model of what we had that we used for assessments, because that's all we had, about how our own police forces -- you know, do they have these forms, are they doing this and doing that? And really the real test or the real metric of whether or not you're having a good police station is not what it looks like, but are people willing to go in and make a complaint? Because if they're willing to go in to make their complaint, one, it means they don't fear the police, they're willing to go in and make it. And two, they have some belief that the police are going to do something about it. And we're seeing more and more of that take place.

There's a danger to that because what's going to happen -- and this is what we work with with the police -- if they do that and you walk in there and you can't produce the answer, you're going to take two steps back. But nevertheless, the reports I'm getting from my commanders down on the ground is that, you know, a year ago the doors -- you didn't see a whole lot of people coming in here. Now you see people coming in there all the time, and you even see kids periodically come in there. All good signs, but the next danger point is they better start producing, because that's where the -- I mean, obviously that's what the people demand.

MR. HOLT: And how is that going to -- (inaudible)?

(Cross talk.)

COL. SPINDLER: Say again?

Q I started to ask. You go ahead.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Well, how does the -- in producing the answers, how big a part does the logistics piece of that play in being able to keep them supplied and out there? Is that hindering their ability to produce answers?

COL. SPINDLER: Sir, it does. And that is really the art form of what we do here in the coalition, especially with the Military Police and the assessment teams, is that what we try to look for is the Iraqi answer. You know, when there -- a problem presents itself on the table, we sit with the Iraqis and we listen to them first. What do they want to do about it? And then we put the problem on them.

Beforehand, a year ago, what they would do, or longer than that, I don't know about the time frame. But certainly not too long ago, if they needed something, we proactively provided them that. We gave them the fish instead of taught them how to fish, you know? And sometimes that was necessary, and we still do that today.

But now, we've got in our programs, it's pretty much ingrained that it's their problem to fix. And so if they need a widget, they've got to work to get that widget. And if they can't get it and they got to go all the way up through their systems, there are bridges that cross over into coalition that say, can you assist us with this?

And that usually begins at my level or the battalion commander's level. But they must show where they have forced and tried to work the system

themselves. And we have found, and interesting enough, I saw some charts the other day that those provinces that have been turned over to Iraqi control -- you can see a real difference in fiscal responsibility, because they have to, you know? They have to take charge of this and they have to take care of their own problems.

Q Yeah, because a lot of logistics really is common sense and not waiting till somebody calls up and says, we're out of bullets, or beans. It's thinking a week or a month or three months ahead. And that's really just a question of getting kind of grooved in the system, isn't it?

COL. SPINDLER: Yes, sir, it is. But to their disadvantage, for the last generation, they've never had a push system. If they needed something, it was always a pull system, even under the last regime.

And as you know from being over here, it is top-heavy and hierarchy control here, not decentralized. That also plays a -- problems with getting logistics quickly and efficiently, in my particular opinion, because so many decisions, I think, could be done at the lower level. But culturally they don't allow for that, that they push these questions up to the higher levels.

And we're working with that, and you see very gradually, and I would say very gradually, you're starting to see more powering down. But that's not going to happen overnight, because you hit it right on. That is not a systems thing. That is a culture thing, that the guy at the top makes the decision. Well, if that's the case, then don't expect that widget to get there overnight.

Q Yeah, and that's generational. Because, I mean, I used to do a lot of business. I used to actually go to Iraq back in the '70s on business. So like, when I go over now, it's just amazing.

COL. SPINDLER: Right.

Q But if you have a system where it'll be top down, where basically you've got to really instruct an entire generation of just staff NCOs and lieutenants and captains that it's okay to think for themselves, in a place like Romania in Eastern Europe, it took 10 years for them to start realizing they were allowed to do these things. You're going to have a --

COL. SPINDLER: Sir, that's exactly right. And in the transition, where the plan where we're going into the next phase of our campaign, which is really necessary to the division and the core campaign, is that we got to build these systems. And I will tell you very honestly that my MP brigade -- I don't have those inherent competencies. I'm a tactical MP brigade but I don't have organizational effectiveness experts. I don't have money experts; I don't have systems experts.

And so we're putting together a tiger team right now that is going into the different headquarters levels to find what the needs statements are. And then we're taking it back to the coalition and saying, hey, I think we need this. Now, this could be -- it could be a civilian. It could be joint; it could be whatever.

But whatever it is, at this particular level, we need somebody to help us build an infrastructure, and I can't do that inherently. And so you're going to see something very different, adviser groups, where before, you know, a couple of years ago, when things were still not as permissive, it was mainly just

coalition in there. I think we're getting to a point now where we've got to get a little bit more sophisticated if we want these systems to take root.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q You've really got to start it at the high school level, because this is something you -- well, between the Iran-Iraq war through now you've lost two generations of education and common sense, because they never had to.

COL. SPINDLER: That's -- and that's right. And they only know what they know. And we make that point, and they make that point, that the leaders -- and of course culturally there's a lot of things that they don't allow, you know, that they're not going to allow maybe certain people or certain -- you know, women or this or whatever's going to be that particular case. They may not allow that in a particular area. And of course religious leaders, the sheikhs or whatever, have great input in all that. And so those are all the dynamics that have to take place, which may or may not sometimes cause frustration with the coalition, but it doesn't matter. It's their problem to solve.

And so we have to do it in that context. And I think we're starting to get the knack of that, and you're seeing it start to pay off --

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Which (youth do you have to ?) --

COL. SPINDLER: -- although a long way to go -- (chuckling) -- a long way to go.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.)

Q Okay.

COL. SPINDLER: (Inaudible.)

Q Are you giving your PTT people any special training before when they come over? Any -- (inaudible) --

COL. SPINDLER: You mean -- certainly the Military Police are given it. We -- and my brigade, we go through, when -- before I deployed, we went through about eight months of training that included everything -- numerous courses, and we called them academics -- cultural experts that come over, language experts that come over -- and then we tailor that, depending on which unit is going into which area, and trying to understand the dynamics. We pay for people, citizens and -- to come over that were local leaders or whatever to come and talk to us. So yes, we do that.

What we haven't done and we're going to start doing now is start to bring over some of the Iraqi police leadership -- what we would like to do -- and bring them into the rear for units that are coming over there, to give it from an Iraqi police perspective, here's what -- here's, you know, what their needs are and what they think their problems are. We haven't done that yet, but we think that's the next step.

MR. HOLT: All right, then. Well, we're running out of time here, but do you have closing thoughts for us, sir?

COL. SPINDLER: Well, sir, I will tell you this -- and I am sure you have heard this before, but -- and I don't think it can be overstated, and I would tell you that it is the absolute truth or I wouldn't waste my time telling you about it -- is that the success of what has happened to this point -- and like I said, there has been tremendous success, but there's a long way to go -- has been at the staff sergeant and captain level.

There are no field manuals for any of this. This is simply young lieutenants and captains and sergeants going in there and sitting around the table with these Iraqis, who also don't have a whole lot of answers, and coming up with a common answer.

And I applaud our bosses and I applaud our leadership here to allow us to decentralize and take care of things differently, depending on how it works out in each community. And I think that has been the real success story up to this point. These soldiers are just doing a phenomenal job.

MR. HOLT: All right. Colonel Mark Spindler, commander of the 18th --

COL. SPINDLER: Even the Navy guys assigned -- even the Navy guys assigned to us are doing a phenomenal job. (Chuckles.)

(Laughter.)

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Colonel Mark Spindler, commander of the 18th Military Police Brigade, Camp Victory, Iraq, thank you very much for joining us, and hopefully we can speak again in the future.

COL. SPINDLER: I'd love to do it. Thanks for your time, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

Q Yeah, Colonel, don't (cut off for us ?). Hey, Jack, excuse me a second.

Colonel, I'm going to be over in your area sometime in the second half of Jan(uary). Any possibility of you coming and spending a day or two, if given ample notice?

COL. SPINDLER: Any time. Any time. You know, we're located on Camp Victory.

Q Been there, sir. Looking forward to coming back.

COL. SPINDLER: We'll look forward to it.

Q Thanks very much. Appreciate the time today.

COL. SPINDLER: Take care. Bye-bye.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

COL. SPINDLER: Bye.

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